

## THE BOMB OUTRAGE IN ERZSÉBETVÁROS AN ACTION OF POLITICAL TERRORISM IN HUNGARY, 1922



### History

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### Abstract

In the 1920s, paramilitary violence was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, like in many other countries of Central Europe. After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire the new right-wing government, establishing its power with the help of the Entente powers, could difficulty rule the quasi anarchistic conditions. In 1920–1921, Hungary was terrorized by irregular military formations that were formally part of the National Army, and radical right-wing soldiers committed serious crimes frequently by anti-Semitic motivations. Although paramilitary violence ceased in 1921, the militia movement lived on in the form of secret paramilitary organizations. The government used up these units, since the right-wing elite was afraid of another Communist takeover, using them as auxiliary police forces, and they also wanted to circumvent the limitations of armament of the Treaty of Trianon, also aiming to cooperate with Austrian and German radical-right paramilitary groups including Hitler's National Socialist movement as well. Irregular soldiers became concerned in political terrorism, the bomb outrage of Erzsébetváros that required 8 casualties on 2 April 1922. Although the police did its best to investigate the cases, most perpetrators interestingly were not sent into prison. The age of the bomb raids, as the press of the opposition called this period, finally ended with the fact that murderous, anti-Semitic terrorists remained at large, and found their places in the authoritarian conservative regime of Hungary of the 1920s. The article reconstructs certain terroristic crimes committed by the members of irregular military formations via a micro-historical case study, based on archival records of criminal suits. Furthermore, beyond the analysis of the individual cases of three different, but interrelating bomb outrages, it intends to draw general conclusions about the controversial and complex relationship between the early Hungarian paramilitary radical right-wing movements and the government, considering that several paramilitary commanders operated as influential radical right-wing politicians as well.

After World War I, in the 1920s, Paramilitarism and paramilitary violence was an almost natural phenomenon in Hungary, just like in many other countries of Central Europe. After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the collapse of the Hungarian Republic of Councils, the new right-wing government establishing its power with the help of the Entente states could only difficulty rule the quasi anarchistic conditions of the country. In 1920–1921, Budapest and the Hungarian country were terrorized by irregular military formations that were formally part of the National Army, but often operated completely independently.

This 2-year-long wave of paramilitary violence which was committed by mainly detachments subordinated to influential paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas, Lieutenant Colonel Pál Prónay or Major Gyula Ostenburg-Morawek is called the White Terror. Radical right-wing irregular soldiers exploiting the weakness of the government committed several serious crimes like robbery, plunder and even murders, frequently by anti-Semitic motivations, and they did it in the disguise of law enforcement measures, since in this period the

military authorities possessed police jurisdictions over civilians as well in order to restore the order.

The government led by Prime Minister Count István Bethlen gradually ceased the White Terror, and disbanded/regularized irregular/paramilitary troops and formations. The otherwise strongly right-wing Hungarian government really did its best to tranquilize the radical right-wing forces and create some kind of social and political peace at last, after the long years of war and civil war.

Although paramilitary violence finally ceased, and irregular military formations were formally disbanded, the radical right-wing Hungarian militia movements mainly consisting of World War I veterans, active and demobilized soldiers lived on the form of secret right-wing paramilitary organizations. The influential radical right-wing organisation Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete (ÉME) – Association of Awakening Hungarians which sometimes operated in a similar way to a political party still had a strong paramilitary character, and it had its irregular militia called *Nemzet védelmi Főosztály – Department of National Defence*. The government, mainly the army and the Ministry of Defence still used up Freikorps-like militia units consisting of veterans for two reasons. On the one hand, the right-wing political and military elite was still afraid of another possible Communist takeover attempt, and used the radical right-wing militias as auxiliary political police forces, keeping them prepared; on the other hand, the countries of the losing side of World War I were subject to serious limitations of armament. Therefore, the government and the military leadership did its best to circumvent limitations, and treated free-corps-like irregular military formations as secret semi-official reserve forces of the army, preparing for a war in the near future in which the territories that were truncated from Hungary by the Treaty of Trianon were to be reoccupied.

Hungarian anti-Communist and irredentist troops were coordinated by the very influential secret military organisation called Kettőskereszt Vérszövetség – Double Cross Blood Union in the 1920s, and thousands of armed people were kept in secret military status, waiting for deployment. The military and the radical right-wing political movements had very strong relations these times due to the historical traumas and hyper-nationalism and exaggerated patriotism nearly necessarily coupled with violent anti-Semitism.

Some secret irregular military formations, mainly related to the Department of National Defence of the ÉME and Double Cross Blood Union started becoming concerned in political terrorism, like the luckily prevented bomb outrage plan in Jászkarajenő in 1922, the bomb outrage of Erzsébetváros that required 8 casualties on 2 April 1922, or the bomb outrage of Csongrád in which 3 people died on 24 December 1923. All the third grave terrorist incidents were committed by the members of the Department of National Defence of the ÉME who were at the same time irregular soldiers of Double Cross Blood Union, and paramilitary commanders First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas and Lieutenant Commander Pál Prónay arose in all the three cases as possible instigators, together with Captain Gyula Gömbös, later Minister of Defence, then Prime Ministers,

in this period the leader of the oppositional Party of Hungarian National Independence (popularly called race-defenders).

The struggle of the parliamentary elections 1922 was disrupted by a series of events that also provided the state with another opportunity to take stronger action against political extremism. In the spring of 1922, the members of the District 9 National Defence Department of the Association of Awakening Hungarians – despite the government's measures to disarm various militias in several stages, the Awakening Hungarians were still operating such armed paramilitary units, which were operating practically without any real state control – decided to commit a bomb outrage against the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros, a liberal political-social organisation at 76 Dohány Street, presided by opposition liberal MP Vilmos Vázsonyi, thereby killing several people they considered enemies of the nation. The assassination and the subsequent trial of the alleged perpetrators was one of the most shocking and publicised events of the 1920s, and was largely referred to in the press as the bombing trial and the Márffy trial after the accused number one called József Márffy.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, the name of the Double Cross Blood Union also appears here, and the documents of the criminal trial include one of the most valuable and fundamental archival sources of the secret military organizations activities. This document is the testimony of the Minister of Defence, General Count Károly Csáky.<sup>2</sup>

On 2 April 1922, a bomb exploded at a meeting of the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros, killing eight people and wounding twenty-three. Given the extremist political situation of the time, assassinations of Jews and of persons and institutions perceived to be pro-anti-Jewish, and the fact that behind them there was the Association of Awakening Hungarians in nearly each cases, and, more specifically, the figures of Iván Héjjas and Pál Prónay, the bomb raid of Erzsébetváros was no longer tried alone, but was finally tried in a triple indictment, together with other anti-Semitic and anti-Semitic crimes:

1. The explosion the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros was linked to an allegedly attempted pogrom against the Újpest Synagogue, planned by two young individuals associated with the Association of Awakening Hungarians named Tivadar Péter and János Salló, but it was not finally carried out.

2. There was also an attempted bomb attack on the Courts Palace of Koháry Street and the French and Czechoslovak embassies in Budapest, and it was only by luck that these bombs finally did not explode.

3. Liberal newspaper owner and journalist Andor Miklós and Károly Rassay, a liberal politician and member of the parliament, well-known opposition politicians of the time, were given packages containing grenades, and it was also only by luck and the vigilance of those

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<sup>1</sup> HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.József Márffy and his associates' trial.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

present that these bombs did not explode when opening. At the same time, the Headquarters of the Hungarian State Police in Budapest, the Speaker of the National Assembly and the French Embassy received a life-threatening letters signed by some people under the name of the 'Committee 101'.

The investigation was personally led by József Sombor-Schweinitzer, one of the prominent leaders of the political police of the era, and the Royal Criminal Court of Budapest accused the young national defence militiamen on the basis of documents seized from the Awakening that the militiamen had deviated from the central national defence objectives, prepared anti-social attacks, and sought to make it impossible for citizens of the Israelite religion to remain in Hungary by so-called Jewish beatings and bomb raids.<sup>3</sup> József Márffy and his associates were also accused of organising a so-called blood court, an internal, arbitrary judiciary body of the organisation, which was to impose death sentence in the event of disobedience, desertion or any acts of treason by its members, József Márffy, in turn, used intimidation and death threats to persuade his accomplices to help organise and carry out the assassinations. This is however contradicted by the fact that, according to the documents, József Márffy only ordered the establishment of a blood court on 14 April 1923 when many of the crimes charged had already been committed. The political gravity of the case is illustrated by the fact that Minister of Defence General Count Károly Csáky and Prime Minister Count István Bethlen were called as witnesses at the main trial. As KárolyCsáky told in his testimony,<sup>4</sup> after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, during the turbulent civil war, Hungary had no unified regular army, and in addition to the semi-irregular National Army organized by Admiral Miklós Horthy there were about fifty civilian militias in Budapest alone. Among these were the national defence units of the Association of Awakening Hungarians. In this chaotic situation, the consolidating new Hungarian government needed these armed paramilitary units to maintain order, and in 1919–1920 Chief of the General Staff General Béla Berzeviczy tried to bring these militias under the control of the Hungarian Army. Among other things, this led to the creation of the Double Cross Blood Union as an umbrella organisation for the various irregular military formations under the control of the army. In order to preserve the honour of the army, the Minister of Defence also stressed in his testimony that although the various militias were under some military control, the army no influence on personnel matters, including the composition of the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians, and the members were not seriously trained and armed by the army, but they were rather treated as a kind of reserve military force which could be deployed if necessary to restore the very fragile order.<sup>5</sup> According to the Ministers interpretation, they basically had no authority in the legal sense, at most they had arbitrarily authorised themselves to do so, and the members of the various national defence militias were only actually called in one time, on 23 October 1921, during Charles IVs second attempt to return, and the militiamen mobilised were only given weapons and salary for that short

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Pp. 457–469.

<sup>5</sup> Tibor Zinner, *Adatok a szélsőjobb oldali egyesületek megalakulásának körülményeihez*, Történelmi Szemle, 1979/3-4, 562–576; 566–567.

period. After that, the Ministry of Defence no longer needed the various irregular military units. The restoration of the Soviet Republic of Hungary and a possible new Communist takeover were no longer a real threat by 1922, so paramilitary units such as the national defence militias of the Awakening Hungarians that mostly consisted of radical right-wing young men became superfluous for the consolidating Horthy-Bethlen government and the Kingdom of Hungary which was seeking to settle its relations with foreign countries after the Trianon Peace Treaty. It was precisely because some of its members had committed serious crimes that the government had to disband the Double Cross Blood Union in 1923. Of course, by the dissolution of the Double Cross Blood Union, Minister Károly Csáky most probably meant the dissolution and/or regularization of the various paramilitary units and the creation of an auxiliary police force called the earlier mentioned National Labour Protection on their basis. At the time of the bomb outrage Erzsébetváros, the members of the National Defence Department of the Awakening Hungarians of District 9 led by József Márffy were already operating as a self-proclaimed civilian militia without any serious military control or instruction, and what they did was of their own free will.

Prime Minister István Bethlen appeared as a witness before the court less because of the political implications of the case rather than clearing himself as a private citizen.<sup>6</sup> József Márffy, in order to show off his own importance and influence, had claimed at an early stage that he was on good personal terms with the incumbent prime minister and his family, that he had played tennis with István Bethlen's sons and that he had often travelled in the prime ministers car. Bethlen, on the other hand, categorically denied in court that he or any of his family members knew Márffy even superficially. The Márffy trial, in Tibor Zinner's very correct and exact view, was primarily necessitated by foreign pressure for the Hungarian state to demonstrate to the Entente, and especially to France that the revolutionary and civil war years following the First World War were over.<sup>7</sup> The government wanted to prove, that political and social order had been restored, Hungary accepted the territorial losses imposed by the Trianon Peace Treaty, and that the process of consolidation had finally begun. Nevertheless, we cannot and do not intend to claim that the bomb outrage the Democratic Circle of Erzsébetváros was not organized and carried out by József Márffy and the militiamen of the national defence unit of District 9 of the Awakening Hungarians, as there is a lot of convincing direct and indirect evidence in this case, as the record of the main trial in the first instance testifies. However, it seems highly probable that the other crimes attributed to them were arbitrarily linked to them by the police for political purposes, and the prosecution and the court also linked to these crimes to the horrific bombing perpetrated by Márffy and his associates under political pressure. Although Márffy was sentenced to death in the first instance, neither he nor his fellow prisoners who were also sentenced to death were ever executed. The trial was continued at the Royal Court of Appeal in Budapest and at the Royal Hungarian Curia, and ended with much lighter sentences.

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<sup>6</sup> HU-BFL-VII-5-c-16193/1923.

<sup>7</sup> Zinner, *Az ébredőkfénykora*, 172.

The Budapest Royal Court of Appeal sentenced József Márffy, the first defendant, to 6 years of imprisonment as the main defendant and 1,500,000 koronas as a subsidiary penalty.

The Royal Supreme Court sitting in third instance sentenced József Márffy to 8 years of imprisonment as the principal penalty and a fine of 1,500,000 koronas as a subsidiary penalty, while the other pleas of nullity were rejected or dismissed.

József Márffy died in 1971 in Kőszeg at the age of 73 as a pensioner.<sup>8</sup> He served most of his prison sentence in the prison of Vác.<sup>9</sup> He was released on parole in 1929 after being diagnosed with severe lung disease. He then settled in Kőszeg where he had family ties, first as local party secretary of the ruling United Party and later as a local leader of the Arrow Cross Party. Márffy never denied his identity or his past in prison; although he never publicly admitted to the acts he had previously been accused of either.

The afterlife of the bomber includes a propaganda publication in the form of a small booklet by the Associations of the Awakening Hungarian, published by the unknown author under the pseudonym Dr Benevolus (Dr Benevolent), and entitled: *The real perpetrators of the Dohány Street bomb raid*. The author of the publication has not been clearly identified, but we can only suspect László Budaváry, Ferenc Ulain, Mihály Kmoskó or another enthusiastic contemporary leader and propagandist of the far-right mass association. The severely libelous and provocative pamphlet, for which the Awakening Hungarians were granted a distribution license for only three months, claims nothing less than that it was radical Jews who killed or had killed their own fellows of religion in order to frame the assassination of decent, Christian Hungarians, and that behind the whole Dohány Street bomb raid there was nothing other than a well-organized Zionist conspiracy. As is typical of the anti-Semitic propaganda literature of the time, this piece of writing begins its own narrative with citing the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, while at the same time it calls on the Jews of Hungary to take action, to join with the Association of the Awakening Hungarians and help Hungary recover from the shameful situation to which their fellow believers had led it through the First World War, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Soviet Republic of Hungary and the Trianon Peace Treaty. The scandalous pamphlet caused outrage among many and disillusioned many former supporters of the Associations of the Awakening Hungarians.

Although the police did its best to investigate several grave bomb outrage cases together with the bombing in Erzsébetváros, and these cases were closely related to each other via the Double Cross Blood Union and the Association of Awakening Hungarians, and lower-ranking paramilitary commanders like István Keő-Kucsera, József Márffy or János Piroksa (all informally subordinated to First Lieutenant Iván Héjjas) and their minions were committed to trial for their

<sup>8</sup> [Anonymous author], *Halálozás*, Vas Népe, 23. 08. 1971. Furthermore, the death records in custody of the Vas County Archive of the National Archives of Hungary verify that the man called József Márffy who deceased in 1971 is the same person involved in the bomb trial.

<sup>9</sup> HU-BFL-VII-101-c-figyenc-I-8184. József Márffy's prison record.

actions, it seems that influential military and political circles tried to save them from prison or even from capital sentence. It is very curious that in the end only the young veteran József Márfy, the mastermind of the bomb raid of Erzsébetváros who was responsible for the death of 8 people was sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment. Although the evidences in all the three criminal suits seemed to be persuading, someone had the power to influence the judges and achieve that terrorists should be exempted from the charges or sentenced only to a couple of years in prison. Although Prime Minister Count István Bethlen did his best to create consolidation in Hungary in the political, social and economic sense of the word, radical right-wing political forces still had some influence, and for example Gyula Gömbös, the informal leader of the Hungarian radical right-wing movements of the 1920s, had a personal good relationship even with Regent Governor Admiral Miklós Horthy who had used to be a paramilitary commander himself in the civil war of 1919–1920 before elected by the parliament as Regent Governor with the strong support of the Entente Powers. The age of the bomb raids, as the press of the opposition sometimes called the period between 1922–1924 finally ended with the fact that murderous, radical right-wing, anti-Semitic terrorists remained at large, and many of them found their places in the authoritarian conservative, strongly right-wing regime of Hungary of the 1920s.

The present short research article was originally written as the introduction of source publication published in Hungarian language that makes an attempt to reconstruct certain serious, terroristic crimes committed by the members of irregular military formations that operated under the supremacy of the secret Hungarian military organisation Double Cross Blood Union via micro-historical case studies, mainly based on archival records of criminal suits in the custody of the Budapest City Archive and in the Central Archive of the National Archives of Hungary. Furthermore, beyond the introduction and analysis of the individual cases of three different, but interrelating bomb outrages from the period 1922–1924, it intends to draw general conclusions about the controversial and complex relationship between the early Hungarian paramilitary radical right-wing movements and the Government and the military leadership.

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